

German-French Case Study: Using Multi-Online Tools to Collaborate Across Borders

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Abstract. This paper examines how students learn to collaborate in English by participating in an intercultural project that focuses on teaching students to work together on a digital writing project using various online tools, and documents their reflections working in an intercultural context. Students from Université Paris Sud Orsay and Bonn Rhein-Sieg-University of Applied Sciences participated in this digital collaboration project. Mixed groups of students, two French and two German, used several synchronous and asynchronous tools to communicate with their counterparts (Facebook, WordPress blog, WIMS e-learning platform, email, videoconferencing). Students had to produce an article together, comparing French and German attitudes about a topic they negotiated freely in their groups. Before publishing their post, students were expected to peer-review the article written by their group. Once published, the posts were commented on by the other participants of the project. The final stage consisted of voting for the best posts on the e-learning platform, WIMS. A videoconference was also organized to create cohesion between the participants. The result of the student evaluations, together with the administrative, technical and intercultural difficulties encountered during the collaboration between two vastly differing university setups is presented.

Keywords: online collaboration, e-learning, writing, speaking, intercultural comparisons.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this collaborative project between students from Bonn Rhein-Sieg-University of Applied Sciences, Germany and Université Paris Sud, Faculté des Sciences, Orsay, France was to: (a) learn how to collaborate in an international environment using various web 2.0 tools; (b) find out how the other side feels about certain issues and compare opinions; (c) practice writing for an international audience using digital technologies; (d) become more autonomous in checking one's writing using the Internet or other tools such as the British National Corpus³ and also learning how to proofread others' pieces of writing.

Four student groups (two German, two French) were assigned to each virtual team. Students freely chose a topic they wished to discuss and write about. Afterwards, the group members jointly wrote an article, which they published on a blog⁴ set up for this purpose. A Facebook group was created to offer a joint platform to communicate with all group members of the project. The pilot project was first carried out in 2011, slightly modified after taking both students' and teachers' observations into account. In this paper we present the 4-month project as it was run in 2012.

2. Method

2.1. Introduction

The action research investigates which online tools students use to collaborate, which tools they prefer and how they perceive collaboration using online tools. We identified the experience students had in collaborating online using different tools prior to the project and designed the program accordingly. This is a small scale investigation with 19 undergraduate and graduate students from Germany and 19 university graduate students from France.

2.2. Background information (participants)

The research was conducted during the winter term 2012. Over a four-month period 38 students worked in 10 groups (9 groups of four with two German and two French students, 1 group of 2: one German and one French student) together.

3. <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>

4. <http://hebergement.u-psud.fr/blog-langues/wordpress/>

Each group wrote a joint article, which they posted on a blog⁵ set up for this purpose. The majority of German students were undergraduate, studying Business Administration (B.Sc.) and three were graduate students of IT. The French students were all graduate students of Primary Education.

2.3. Data collection

The perceptions of working collaboratively were analyzed by using an online questionnaire based on questions used in research conducted by [Hughes and Narayan \(2009\)](#) and [Ducate, Anderson, and Moreno \(2011\)](#). The questionnaire was offered online on the Web Interactive Multi-Purpose Platform (WIMS: open source platform)⁶ and offered both quantitative and qualitative data. First, general demographic data and the previous experience of working online were gathered. Then, the program was designed and the act of collaboration was analyzed by asking students how they worked together online and how frequently they communicated. Furthermore, the students were asked to comment on their writing and proofreading skills. Finally, the students' perception of the project was examined.

There were 40 questions grouped into six categories:

- general information about the participant (age, gender, studies);
- prior experience in use of online collaborative tools;
- collaboration in virtual teams (type of online tools used, frequency of communication);
- writing skills (skills learned, proofreading, etc.);
- perceptions of the project (ease of communication and usefulness of the project);
- recommendations to future participants.

25 (13 Germans and 12 French) out of 38 students answered the questionnaire that was intended to evaluate the collaborative writing project. We did not have the means to analyze the progression in writing skills and media literacy.

5. <http://hebergement.u-psud.fr/blog-langues/wordpress/>

6. <http://wims.u-psud.fr/wims>

3. Results

3.1. Prior online experience

Except for one German student, all participants had a Facebook account prior to the project. The majority of students had never blogged before and only 4 French and 2 German students had blogged in English. While all the French respondents had never participated in a collaboration project in either French or English, 2 Germans had prior experience in collaborating in English.

3.2. Collaboration

The frequency of communication and the use of tools were examined to offer a basis to analyze collaboration. All students preferred to communicate via e-mail and Facebook and did not choose any other online tool to communicate (e.g. Skype). During the project 17 of 25 respondents communicated more than six times with their partners. 7 students corresponded 4 to 6 times.

3.3. Writing skills

Except for one French student, all proofread their own writing and those of their group. Concerning frequency of proofreading, a difference can be observed: 8 out of 13 Germans proofread their writing more than twice, whereas only 4 French students did so; 5 German and 7 French students proofread their writing once or twice and 1 French student never did any proofreading.

3.4. Perceptions of the project

Everyone thought the project was useful training for international collaborative work, and all the students enjoyed it on the whole. The comments made by the students show that most students enjoyed the opportunity to work in an international environment and to compare points of view. They appreciated the liberty they were given to negotiate the content of their writing⁷. Below are some selected comments:

7. A total of 10 articles and 102 comments were posted on the course blog: 1. How football became a business model in Germany and France; 2. German and French prejudice; 3. Energies; 4. Social networks; 5. French and German cinema; 6. Going abroad while studying; 7. The impact of the Internet on art; 8. Doping in cycling; 9. How to get abroad; 10. Student housing in Germany and France.

German student: “I liked the idea of working together with students from a foreign university compared to the tasks which we would have had to do otherwise”.

German student: “A complete new experience...”.

French student: “It was interesting to discover the less academic approach to writing of the Germans”.

French student: “It was interesting to observe the way the Germans worked and to compare whether there were any differences with our way of working”.

French student: “...the Germans were very nice and tolerant despite our lower level of English”.

3.5. Recommendations to future participants

All except for one German student would recommend this project to other students. Most students urged frequent and regular communication, not only about the topic they had chosen but about themselves, and giving the project plenty of time because the topic had to be researched thoroughly and for success creating a rapport with team members was essential. The French recommended assigning clear roles to all the members of the team for more efficiency. They also advised future students about the need to impose the “legendary German rigor” throughout the collaboration and the need to answer e-mails without delay.

4. Discussion

In the analysis of the data presented, it is necessary to consider the different university set ups. The French students had no English classes throughout the project. Moreover, halfway through the project, the French students were informed that due to changes in the state curriculum no credits could be provided for their involvement in the online English project. Despite this the French students continued the project and were intrinsically motivated.

After a first kick-off meeting the language instructor communicated with the French students via Facebook or the WIMS platform. This may explain the French apprehension of oral encounters with the German students, i.e. reluctance to participate in the video conference or not choosing online tools for oral communication (e.g. Skype). Not having an English class could explain why most

French students had not felt their writing skills had improved, whereas the majority of German students felt that they had made progress in writing.

The German students had a three-hour English class each week where the language instructor could address issues and provide language guidance to the students. In addition, several online activities were done directly in class.

As seen in this case study, students learned from each other and spent time writing a collaborative article as well as meeting in synchronous situations. Some frustration was voiced by the French students who were unable to express their ideas in English during the video conference, whereas this was not an issue for the written assignment as they had time to look up words and formulate ideas. The use of multiple tools offers new forms of learning both linguistically and socially for language learners. Furthermore, it offers opportunities to communicate with other non-native speakers using English as *lingua franca*. It is important to point out that the language proficiency differed. In Germany the class was a level B2-C1, while in France the levels were lower: A2-B1.

Despite these differences the project had an overall positive outcome: some French students highlighted the tolerance and the pleasantness of their German counterparts and suggested enjoying the communication instead of focusing on language difficulties. Scaffolding offered by more experienced learners, as described in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) is an important element in social interaction. [Blake \(2011\)](#) points out recent trends in online learning have triggered a number of issues in language learning from traditional face-to-face instruction, newer hybrid learning scenarios or distant learning. The most important benefit from learning with online tools is that students are more involved, and social computing CALL offers new opportunities for students to learn from each other in an international setting.

[Li \(2012\)](#) points out that empirical research has found that each writing task and writing instruction needs to be designed for a specific purpose. As such, the instructor's role is an important aspect in each collaborative project. Providing feedback on collaborative work, offering scaffolding and participating within the collaborative environment is also essential. For future projects the question is what strategies and tools can be used to prepare students for spontaneous oral scenarios, and to offer more scaffolding for written and oral assignments. In addition, the coordinators/instructors' perceptions need to be included in a more detailed analysis. Furthermore, assessing the knowledge gained from the sociocultural perspective needs to be examined in more detail.

5. Conclusions

Despite different university set ups (undergraduate/graduate level, distance course versus regular language classes), language proficiency (B2-C1 versus A2-B1 levels) and assessment requirements, it is possible to run an international collaborative project online.

Student awareness of cultural differences and tolerance play an important role in such a project. It is also essential to provide clear objectives and detailed instructions to the participants to reduce stress. Close, constant collaboration between country coordinators is a necessary prerequisite for completing a successful project.

In the future, more guidance and practice in writing (e.g. using formal style) and speaking (e.g. strategies for reformulation, asking for clarification, paraphrasing) should be provided.

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